



# PEOPLE, SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS

Chaired by Peter Hansford  
Deakin University

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## **Building a social license to operate for renewable gas: Reflections and lessons learnt since 2020**

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As Australia seeks to decarbonise its economy, many new renewable and low carbon energy technologies are emerging. For these energy technologies to play a role in an accelerated energy transition, they must be accepted across communities, markets and socio-political systems, which requires building Social Licence to Operate (SLO) over time. Gaining social acceptance can drive the pace of transition just as much as SLO withdrawal can impede progress. Keeping in mind that SLO-building is a careful craft, a series of engagement activities since 2020 were initiated with a specific focus on renewable gases such as hydrogen and biogas to gauge levels of awareness and acceptance. Reflecting upon these activities, we distil key lessons to inform crucial next steps for continuous and ongoing engagement.

**Method:** We present a synthesis of work conducted as part of a Social Licence to Operate research program under the Future Fuels CRC since 2020 that has used social research methods such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, deliberative engagement processes (citizens' panels) to engage with the lay public and communities of interest; and assess corresponding levels of awareness and acceptance towards hydrogen and biogas.

**Results:** From the various research methods, stakeholder groups and geographies involved, it is possible to deduce what matters most to various stakeholder/ community of interests in relation to energy transition. A qualitative synthesis of these works offers insights for future SLO-building activities. Such SLO-building activities are needed to secure ongoing acceptance for renewable gases alongside other energy technologies over the next decades.

For example, one recurrent theme has been that participants in each set of communities (engaged with so far) admit to being ill-informed about the prospect of hydrogen and biogas as renewable energy fuel candidates. Upon receiving peer reviewed, factual, neutral information about these technologies, participants' level of awareness has grown along with their levels of support towards each technology. This has been a consistent observation notwithstanding the nature of information shared. i.e whether the information is shared in a short message, such as a video or image shared via a survey; or a dense and complex series of presentations delivered by leading experts, over a course of three weeks in a citizens' panel. Based on this observation - that there is a positive link between awareness and acceptance - there is a need to continue to develop and test hydrogen and biogas messages, subtly repeating a process of information dissemination, with other communities of interest and key market and socio-political players. As information dissemination across communities/ markets/ socio-political players broadens its scope and span, the SLO for renewable gases may continue to strengthen and gain traction.

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## The biocultural approach to effective clean energy projects

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The Commonwealth Government has recently committed to the collaborative cross-cultural design of the First Nations Clean Energy Strategy with First Nations Communities and organisations. This is a priority under the Commonwealth's National Energy Transformation Partnership. The Strategy can potentially deliver a positive transformational impact across regional Australia, where First Nations Peoples' Country (i.e., land, sea and sky) enables clean energy production in the national transition to net-zero carbon emissions.

Beyond a physical asset for energy production, First Nations Peoples' Country embodies entwined tangible and intangible entities, phenomena, patterns and processes of Peoples, landscapes, water, climate, and biodiversity. It constitutes a land, sea and sky 'space' comprising a complex system of relationships and responsibilities between People and Country that create a cohesive BioCultural whole, inclusive of language, practices such as cultural burning, and Kinship dynamics. First Nations' Country incorporates a resilient natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial and built suite of integrated capital, essential for establishing a resilient, culturally appropriate and self-determined future for First Nations Communities that also provides benefits to development proponents, regional communities and the wider Australian public.

Extractive resource activities traditionally seek to maximise the financial returns of production. Historically, they have typically lacked ethical and effective culturally appropriate procedures and protocols for incorporating on-site BioCultural systems that underpin First Nations' Country. This has disconnected First Peoples from their Country, thereby marginalising their values, aspirations, and Voices. This has exacerbated socio-cultural-biophysical loss and damage, economic vulnerabilities and health and well-being disadvantage in many Communities. Such activities fail to comply with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

Unless proactively seeking to secure Culturally Strong Spaces and Opportunities by acknowledging and addressing cultural safety, cultural security and cultural proficiency, the increasing interest in First Nations Peoples' Country for clean energy production will likely present ongoing risks to First Nations Peoples' Communities. Conversely, it provides a suite of opportunities for securing strong sustainability by turning destructive processes around to create a new future where clean energy production represents a mechanism to preserve and regenerate BioCultural systems as intertwined social, cultural and biophysical processes, whilst promoting socio-cultural-economic self-determination as envisaged by First Nations Peoples' Communities and groups.

This presentation aims to show a critical gap between clean energy projects in Australia and the current approach to Traditional Ownership, making visible and possible the inclusion of The BioCultural Approach as a suite of guiding principles, perspectives, practices and tools for developing effective and ethical clean energy projects.

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## **Climate contracts: A Swedish perspective on transdisciplinary partnerships for energy transitions.**

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This presentation will introduce the concept of 'climate contracts' which are being trialled as a method to co-ordinate transdisciplinary partnerships for energy transitions in cities and municipalities in Sweden. As Europe races to achieve its target to become the first climate neutral continent by 2050, there are increasing calls for cross sectoral participation to drive this transition. Climate City Contracts are one such response, having first emerged in 2020 in Sweden through the transdisciplinary research platform 'Viable Cities'. The goal of Viable Cities is to support radical transformation to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees. Climate contracts are effectively co-designed action plans whereby municipalities, public authorities and academia collaborate on real world commitments to accelerate local decarbonization to support global climate goals. Climate contracts are designed to function as a long-term governance tool to co-ordinate and align actors within complex mission-oriented, multi-level (national, regional and local) projects to support collaborative efforts to achieve climate-neutral cities and municipalities. Currently 23 Swedish municipalities have developed Climate Contracts. As the climate contract approach evolves it will form a useful case study, and as a process it offers a highly replicable model - it is already being promoted as a useful approach for the rest of Europe.

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## **Realities of electric mobility transition in developing countries: the case of Nepal**

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Degrading air quality in Nepalese cities has required Nepal to opt for cleaner transport solutions. Hence, it has embarked into electric mobility (e-mobility). Despite supporting policies, availability of renewable energy and a history of electric trolley bus operation, the deployment of electric vehicles in Nepal is sluggish. Lack of related legislations, detailed plans, programs, and budget as well as volatile government policies on electric vehicles have caused the operational issues with its EV policies. In this study, we aimed to understand the reasons behind this existing gap between Nepal's aspiration for e-mobility and its political reality. Based on 13 key informant interviews with current and former government officials, automotive dealers, environmentalists, and academicians, we found three major explanations behind the slow deployment of electric vehicles. First, e-mobility development in Nepal is largely contingent upon the financial support from its multilateral and bilateral donors and the attitude of policy makers and practitioners towards them. Second, Nepal's relationship with India is a big determinant of the pace of its e-mobility transition because it depends on India for international trade and transit as well as its vehicle and petroleum needs. And third, Nepal is internally divided when it comes to prioritizing economic and environmental objectives. We conclude that Nepal struggles to balance between its financial and institutional weaknesses and the pressures such as growing air pollution and global momentum for e-mobility. In the context of mobility transformation happening around the world, Nepal's e-mobility journey and underlying challenges at the higher level of government can represent the realities of transition in the developing world, landlocked countries in particular.

